

ACCUSATIONS

Acts 6.9-8.1

Quite often, we get wrapped up in an event that is related to a bigger event and lose sight of the big picture. It's an easy thing to do, especially when we are studying Scripture.

The story of Stephen is one example. All of are very familiar with Stephen's arrest and trial, of his long speech in Acts 7, and of the result of his trial – his death by stoning at the hands of the Sanhedrin while Saul stood by and assented to the execution.

The question we need to ask about this story – and anything we read in the Bible – is how the life, testimony, and death of Stephen affect the life of the church in the 21st Century.

For a few moments, let's review the ministry and the message of Stephen.

Apparently, Stephen's ministry had a profound effect, not only on the church, but on the city as well. So much so, that the Jewish leadership sought to dampen its effectiveness...

- Debate
- Deception
- Death

First of all, the Jewish leadership made an effort at

- Striving (disputing with Stephen)
- Stymied (could not resist or stand up to his wisdom)
- Suborned witnesses (to throw under; to throw something w/o caring where it lands)
- Stirred up the people (made it easier to arrest)
- Stood Stephen before the Sanhedrin
- Set up false witnesses

Stephen spoke blasphemous words against

- Temple (Jesus will destroy this place)
- Moses (Jesus will change the customs and the Law of Moses)

- Saw in his face the appearance of an angel.

When asked to respond to the accusations of the witnesses, Stephen began what became the longest sermon in the book of Acts made up almost entirely of quotations from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible.

- Immediately, respectfully, went on the offensive.
- Not a defense, but an indictment.
- No evangelistic appeal.
- Little reference to Christ
- No reference to the resurrection
- Ends with a serious and aggressive accusation.

Stephen answered both accusations – blasphemy against God and the Temple and blasphemy against Moses and the Law.

He answers the first accusation dealing with blasphemy against God and the Temple in verses 2-19.

- Verses 2-8 Abraham
- Verses 9-19 Joseph

He addresses the second accusation concerning blasphemy against Moses and the Law in v. 20-44.

Acts 7:2-5

One way that Stephen answered the charge of blasphemy was his use of Scripture. Most of what he says to the Sanhedrin that day was quotes from memory, many of them word-for-word from the word of God that was most commonly used in the day – the Septuagint.

He answered the charge by addressing God as the “God of glory.” The same God (Jehovah) who spoke to Moses and who filled the Tabernacle with His glory – appeared to Abraham – the father of all Israel (*fathers and brothers*) in Ur of the Chaldeans-where there was neither Tabernacle nor Temple.

Abraham moved to Haran, north of Canaan. And God talked to him there as well.

He continued on to what would later be referred to as “the Promised Land,” and God spoke to Abraham, even though there was not only no Temple, but neither was there an altar.

In verse 5, Stephen pointed out that, although Abraham and Isaac and Jacob inhabited the land of promise, they never owned any of it except a cave that Abraham purchased to use as a cemetery.

God did not want Abraham and Isaac and Jacob to become attached to the land and forget the God who had promised it to them. He wanted their complete focus on Him. They were obedient to that call and never owned the land. They just lived their lives trusting that God would one day fulfill His promise.

Acts 7.6-8

Stephen also answered the charge of blasphemy by his reference to the covenant that God made with Abraham and to circumcision.

The covenant was God's promise to Abraham that Israel would be God's chosen for all of time.

Circumcision was Israel's acknowledgement of the covenant as well as their commitment to love and to serve God forever.

All of these things – call, covenant, circumcision, worship, service – preceded the Temple.

Stephen was reminding the Sanhedrin about the sovereign nature of the God of Abraham. He is omnipresent. Everywhere we go in the Universe, there He is. Thus the worship of God is not limited to the confines of the Temple walls.

In verses 9-19, Stephen reviewed the life of Joseph and the movement of the family into Egypt and their subsequent enslavement.

There are so many parallels between the life of Joseph and the life of Jesus that it is no coincidence that Stephen spent several verses on the topic.

Both were betrayed by those with whom they were closest and delivered to an enemy for the purpose of death. Only after a period of time was Joseph recognized as the savior of the family of Jacob and of the nation of Israel. One day, the nation will recognize that Jesus is their Savior also.

Israel dwelt in the land of Egypt for 430 years, the latter part as slaves of the people of Egypt. Yet God was there in their midst and raised up Moses in that place.

Next Stephen dealt with the accusation of blasphemy against Moses and the Law. Most of his message (v. 20-45) deals with Moses because he knew how critical Moses and the Law were to the Jews.

There are so many parallels between Moses and Christ.

Moses	Christ
1. Freed people from bondage to slavery	Frees people from bondage of sin and death
2. Native Hebrew rejected by his own nation	Hebrew from Nazareth, rejected by His own
3. Exalted by God to return as the deliverer of God's people	Same
4. Came to Egypt as a servant	Came to Earth as a servant
5. Proved his authority by signs and wonders	Same
6. Received "living oracles" (v.38) from God to give the people	Brought the living Word to life and gave himself for the people
7. A prophet raised up by God from among the people	Same (Prophesied by Moses himself, Deut. 18.15)

But the one thing Stephen made clear in this portion about Moses was that the nation of Israel has been a nation in rebellion since the time that Moses led the nation out of captivity.

Acts 7.23-29

The indication from Stephen is that Moses received the call of God to deliver the Israelites from slavery when he was 40 years old while he still lived in the palace of Pharaoh.

When the opportunity came to prove his calling to some of his brethren, he chose to do it by killing an Egyptian. But his method backfired on him.

This self-appointed spokesperson for the nation of Israel rejected the idea that Moses was their deliverer. Moses didn't look like a savior, and he did not come from a place that an Israelite would have looked for a savior. So they rejected Moses outright, both spiritually and physically.

Stephen helps us with this interpretation in **verses 34- 35**.

Even after being delivered from slavery, the nation continued to reject the leadership of Moses.

Verse38-41

The people "rejoiced in the works of their own hands." They were satisfied that they had within them all the righteousness they needed. Their works should be enough to satisfy God himself.

Time and again Israel rejected the authority and worship of God for the sake of their own self-interest.

They worshiped the creature more than the Creator, so we see in **verse 42**, "God gave them up..."

It is interesting that Luke would know so much detail from this trial. If we wanted to conjecture, we might wonder if he learned all of the things that happened in the trial and all of the things Stephen said from the Apostle Paul. Is it likely that Paul (Saul) was there that day? And if so, did he remember the parallel between this sermon by Peter and the things the Holy Spirit inspired him to write in Romans 1?

Romans 1.21-25

It was Moses himself, acting in the role of prophet, who prophesied the coming of the Savior from among the people, just as he had come from among the people. **Verse 37**

Even while in exile wandering in the wilderness because of their murmuring against Moses and the will of Jehovah they continued to worship other gods.

They may feel pride in their heritage and in Moses as their forefather, but from the beginning they were a rebellious and unfaithful people.

Then Stephen returned to the issue of the Temple. He reminded the council that the idea of a Tabernacle during the wilderness wanderings was God's idea.

It gave a point of focus to keep the heart of the people turned towards God and the worship that is due Him.

When the Israelites finally entered the Promised Land with under the leadership of Joshua, they brought the Tabernacle with them.

But by now they had begun to see the Tabernacle and the Ark that resided therein, not as a means to an end – the worship and service of God – but as an end in itself.

The Ark was carried into battle as a talisman, captured by enemies, stored in houses and tents. But it was never set up as a point of worship as it had been in the wilderness. The people had arrived in the Promised Land. Why did they need a Tabernacle?

Then along came David and determined to build a house where the Ark could reside permanently. Stephen reminded the council that the Tabernacle was God's idea, but the Temple was David's idea.

David was not allowed to build the Temple, but spent the rest of his life preparing for its construction. His son, Solomon, built the Temple, but on the day of its consecration, Solomon realized the futility of building a house for God.

2 Chron. 2:6 Who is able to build Him a temple, since heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain Him? Who am I then, that I should build Him a temple, except to burn sacrifice before Him?

The Temple was a place for men to congregate and to offer sacrifices, but it was not the house of God on the Earth. It was not the only place that men could come into the presence of God.

- Abraham met Him in Ur, and in Haran, and in Canaan.
- Moses met Him in Egypt and in Midian inside a burning bush.
- The people of Israel offered sacrifices in the Tabernacle in the wilderness.

A Temple was not necessary for man to come face to face with the sovereign Lord of the Universe.

Stephen is now nearing the end of his message – his indictment – against the council before him.

To complete his point, he quoted from the scriptures one final time, this time from Isaiah.

Verses 49-50

Now suddenly, there is an abrupt change in Stephen's message and demeanor.

He has proven that he has not blasphemed against God or the Temple, nor against Moses and the Law.

Suddenly, it seems, Stephen realizes that these men are not listening to him – that reason has no effect on a heart of stone and that righteousness is the farthest thing from their thoughts.

So he ends his message with a resounding accusation that cuts them to the heart.

Verses 51-53

Stiffnecked – same word God used of Israel 8x in the OT.

Reference is to a horse or oxen which refuses to allow the farmer to apply the yoke necessary for plowing.

Uncircumcised in hearts and ears – meant that these men who are sitting here are not included in the covenant with Abraham and are not included in the children of Moses.

These men who knew the scriptures certainly recalled that it was Moses himself who had given them the commandment of God to “circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked.” (**Deut. 10.16**)

Once again we are reminded of the Apostle Paul, who may have been listening to Stephen as he preached, because later Paul would write...

Romans 2:28 He is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; 29 but he is

a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.

Now at the end of his sermon, Stephen indicts the council as co-conspirators in the persecution of the prophets of old and as guilty of killing “The Just One.”

All through the sermon, Stephen has stayed away from the one name that incited wrath in the hearts of the Jewish leadership. Even now, he did not call the Savior by name, but referred to Him as “The Just One.”

He did not want the members of the council to think in terms of the man Jesus, for it was not just a man that they had killed. They had killed the Messiah – the deliverer that had been promised since the days of Adam in the Garden.

I am sure you all know what happened next.

Verses 7.54-8.1

At the beginning of the message, I pointed out that we need to avoid getting caught up in the story and look for what God is saying to us today through this story. I think there are several points that we can take home with us today.

1. God is not limited by location. Wherever He meets His people is holy ground.
2. God does not call us to settle down. He calls us to always be growing in maturity and going in missions.
3. We may be living in a great place, but God has called us to be pilgrims. Israel is the home of the Jews, but it is not the land of God.
4. The land was promised to Israel by God forever, but not so they would miss the call to go to the ends of the earth with the message of the love of God.
5. We attribute our position and possessions as God-given – as if God had given them to us **for** us. But the things that God has provided to us are given, not for our comfort and blessing, but for our use in the kingdom – for the service and the worship and the glory of God.